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ABSTRACT

For several years a researcher has been tracking the changing conditions of literacy learning as they have been experienced by ordinary people living through them. The purpose was to understand what sharply rising standards for literacy have meant to successive generations of Americans and how they have responded to steady changes in the meanings and methods of literacy learning. In wide-ranging discussions people were asked to remember everything they could about how they learned to write and read across their lifetimes, focusing particularly on the institutions, materials, people, and motivations involved in the process. The aim was to gather a chronicle of literacy learning set within the economic and cultural movements that changed the landscape of southern Wisconsin from an overwhelmingly agrarian society at the turn of the 20th century into a nexus of information and service economies at the turn of the 21st century. The case studies of two prototypical women give rise to a discussion which looks at sponsorship patterns in the literacy opportunities of these women. The larger aim is to extract from their experience lessons that can be applied to literacy learning in any economic configuration. (Contains 12 endnotes and 38 references.) (NKA)

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LITERACY, OPPORTUNITY, AND ECONOMIC CHANGE

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LITERACY, OPPORTUNITY, AND ECONOMIC CHANGE

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Literacy is so much an expectation in this country that is has become more usual to ask why and how people fail to read and write than to ask why and how they succeed. In a society where virtually every child attends school and where some kind of print penetrates every corner of existence, only the strongest sorts of countervailing forces—oppression, alienation, dislocation—seem able to exclude a person from literacy. Asked to imagine how their lives would be different if they didn't know how to read and write, people I have spoken with are often baffled and pained. "I would be totally in the dark," they say. Or, "It would be like not having shoes."

To think of literacy as a staple of life—on the order of indoor lights or clothing—is to understand how thoroughly most Americans in the late twentieth century are able to take their literacy for granted. It also is to appreciate how central reading and writing can be to people's sense of well being, even to their sense of dignity. At the same time, these analogies ask us to take a deeper look. They remind us that, as with electricity or manufactured goods, individual literacy exists only as part of larger material systems, systems that on the one hand enable acts of reading or writing and on the other hand confer their value. Changes in these systems change the meaning and status of individual literacy much as the newest style of shoes—or method of producing shoes—might enhance or depreciate the worth of the old. Thus, despite a tendency to take the resource of literacy for granted, acquiring literacy—like acquiring other basic staples of life—remains an active, often daunting process for individuals and families. This process has been exacerbated especially by turbulent economic changes that do not merely raise expectations for literacy achievement from one generation to the next but often ruthlessly reconfigure the social and economic systems through which literacy can be pursued and through which it can find its worth.

Over the last several years I have been tracking the changing conditions of literacy learning as they have been experienced by ordinary people living through them. My aim is to understand especially what sharply rising standards for literacy have meant to successive generations of

Americans and how they have responded to steady changes in the meanings and methods of literacy learning. How do people experience as part of felt life what too many pundits call the literacy crisis: the relentless demand for literacy that seems chronically to outstrip supply, the need for more and more people to do more and more things with reading and writing? Throughout the early 1990s I interviewed a diverse group of nearly 100 people born between 1895 and 1985, all of whom were living at the time of the interviews in south central Wisconsin. In wide-ranging discussions lasting from one to three hours, I asked people to remember everything they could about how they learned to write and read across their lifetimes, focusing particularly on the institutions, materials, people, and motivations involved in the process. What counted as literacy learning in these discussions was anything that people thought significant. No threshold was set for what counted as literacy learning and nothing that was mentioned was excluded. The aim was to gather a chronicle of literacy learning set within the economic and cultural movements that changed the landscape of southern Wisconsin from an overwhelmingly agrarian society at the turn of the twentieth century into a nexus of information and service economies at the turn of the twenty-first century. Taken together, the accounts link literacy learning to regional transformations over an eighty-year period.[1]

The project is grounded in principles of oral history and life history research developed by Bertaux (1981; Bertaux & Thompson, 1993, 1997), Thompson (1975, 1988, 1990), Lummis (1987) and others who emphasize the dynamic relationship between individual and collective practices and sociohistorical change. In this approach, the history of a period is apprehended through the life span, which sets the material and cultural boundaries within which people live out social and economic relationships with others. Of key significance in this approach are similarities and differences in the lives of people who have experienced the same set of structural relations and have lived through the same events. This method is useful for gathering information about changes in the material networks through which people have learned and practiced literacy across time. It also exposes dynamic changes in definitions and expectations for literacy and the ways they are experienced in different times by different groups and generations. (Also see Conger & Elder, 1994; Elder, 1974, 1994; Elder & Liker, 1982; Ryder, 1965.)

In analyzing the interviews I sought frameworks that would be particularly sensitive to the presence of economic forces at the scenes of literacy learning. What was the relationship, I kept

bluntly asking of the data, between the way that money gets made and the way that literacy gets made? The analysis needed to capture both the value of literacy for individual learners and the value that literate individuals had in wider arenas of economic competition into which their skills were being recruited. These two sides of literacy are not necessarily easy to separate yet are key, I believe, for understanding the spiraling demands for reading and writing skill in the twentieth century. For purposes of the analysis, then, I approached literate skill as a resource, which like wealth or education or trade skill or social connections, is pursued for the opportunities and protections that it potentially grants its seekers. As a resource, or what accountants might call an intangible asset (Smith & Parr, 1989), literacy has potential pay-off in gaining power or pleasure, in accruing information, civil rights, education, spirituality, status, money (see Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Grubb, 1990, 1992; and Murray, 1997). To treat literacy as a resource is to appreciate the lengths that families and individuals will go to secure (or re-secure) literacy for themselves or their children. But it also takes into account how the resources of literate skill are exploited in competitions for profit or advantage that go on within the larger communities in which people live and in which their literacy learning takes place. I eventually hit on an analytical concept that was most sensitive to these simultaneous forces, a concept that I came to call *sponsors* of literacy.[2] Sponsors are any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who aid and abet literacy learning or block literacy learning, who teach, model, share, cajole, coerce, withhold, reward, or punish literacy learning and gain advantage by it in some way. Sponsors, in fact, appeared all over people's memories of how they learned to write and read, in their memories of persons, materials, and institutional and work settings. Using grounded theory (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), I coded all the interview transcripts for sponsors and sponsoring activity. Sponsors, as I came to understand them, embody the resource management systems of literacy. Sponsors also introduce the instability and volatility in the worth of people's literacy. As various sponsors of literacy emerge and recede and as their prospects rise and fall as part of economic and political competition, so go the prospects of their sponsored, both in terms of opportunities for literacy learning and the particular worth of particular literate skills.

To put some flesh on these assertions, consider the parallel lives of two European American, mid-western women I will call Martha Day and Barbara Hunt. Both were raised on eighty-acre, low-income dairy farms that their fathers had inherited, Martha Day in northern Indiana and

Barbara Hunt in southern Wisconsin. Both grew up in sparse, rural settlements of 500 families or less, some distance from stores and schools. Both were the middle of three children. Both found much of their academic writing less memorable and satisfying than their extracurricular writing: Martha Day with the high school yearbook and Barbara Hunt with her State Forensics Association. Both read often for pleasure, and both kept journals. Neither had much money nor family encouragement for schooling beyond the twelfth grade, and both left home and went to work shortly after high-school graduation. For all of these striking similarities in background, however, the differences in their life circumstances are more pronounced. For one thing, they were born 68 years apart, Martha Day in 1903 and Barbara Hunt in 1971. Further, while Martha Day found her way after high school into a journalism career, becoming a columnist and women's editor for a regional magazine, *The Mid-Plains Farmer*, Barbara Hunt, at twenty-two years old, was cashiering at the Mid-Plains Mobil Station, doing child care on the side, and taking an occasional course in the human services program at a two-year technical college 25 miles from her home.

This contrast speaks directly of course to the rising standard for literacy and school achievement across a sixty-year span (Resnick & Resnick, 1977). Martha Day's high school graduation in 1920 made her among the best educated members of her community while the only thing guaranteed to high school graduates in the 1980s was that they would earn several hundred thousand dollars less over their lifetimes than college graduates. But these accounts also point up subtler cultural changes that affect literacy development. Martha Day came of age when the small, family farm economy in the Midwest was worth more, literally in terms of dollars and jobs but also culturally and socially. At the turn of the century, Martha Day belonged to the forty per cent of the U.S. population engaged in the agricultural sector. By the time of Barbara Hunt's birth in 1971, farm kids belonged to the two per cent of the population left in agriculture. Martha Day's residence on an eighty-acre farm and her attendance at a two-room country school made her background typical of European Americans in her predominantly rural state. Sixty years later, rural schools joined urban schools in being chronically underfinanced in comparison with suburban districts, and family-owned dairy farms were disappearing from the Wisconsin landscape at a rate of a thousand farms a year (Census of Agriculture, 1992; also see Saupe & Majchrowicz, 1996). Although Martha Day and Barbara Hunt both were profoundly affected by

wrenching transformations in rural life, Martha Day was able to trade more seamlessly on the status of her farm-girl background to make the transition from physical to mental labor. For Barbara Hunt, similar features of the farm-girl background found little resonance within the economy in which she was competing.

The following discussion will look systematically at sponsorship patterns in the literacy opportunities of these two women. Of special significance are the webs of social relationships in which they lived, the gendered division of labor into which they stepped, the media they used, the relative health of the institutions that supported (and exploited) their literacy learning, as well as the broader economic and cultural contexts in which their communities were competing. The accounts of Martha Day and Barbara Hunt will provide a stark and immediately accessible illustration of relationships between literacy and opportunity because changes to rural life in America are both dramatic and familiar to the society. Yet my larger aim is to extract from their experience lessons that can be applied to literacy learning in any economic configuration—not in order to predict particular outcomes but to understand better the struggles that economic transformations bring to the pursuit of literacy. With this knowledge we might be in a better position to find ways to compensate for tears in social fabrics that these transformations leave behind, tears that can make the pursuit of literacy feel so harrowing and unfair for so many.

"The Typical Little Village of That Day": The Case of Martha Day

At the risk of oversimplifying, we could say that Martha Day's earliest literacy development took place within a local society that was growing together while Barbara Hunt's took place within a local society that was coming apart. Many elements of Martha Day's earliest literacy memories are set within an emerging infrastructure of electric lights, paved roads, rural mail delivery, rising farm prices, farm journalism, and expanding schooling that developed as part of a turn-of-the-century boom time in mid-western rural areas.[3] Like many people I have talked to from this time and place, Martha Day shared proudly in a progressive identity that seemed to be delivered into many rural households along with the local newspaper. Reading of periodicals was linked to forward-looking thinking, intelligent farming, and political participation, including

among people like Martha Day's parents, who, like most of their neighbors, had grade school educations. Here is Martha Day's recollection of the presence of newspapers in her home:

> Dad always subscribed to [the nearest daily] and took it by the year. My Dad was smart and a good scholar and a most interested man in politics and everything that was going on. I don't remember reading it much, but I remember when my father came in from working in the fields, the first thing he'd do is, if the paper, if the mail had come, he would sit down and read the newspaper. He was very sharp on that kind of thing. For that day.

Martha Day attended grade school about one mile from her farm in one of the many two-story brick schoolhouses that had been scattered around her county in the late nineteenth century.[4] Because her community did not provide public education beyond tenth grade, she and her brother finished high school in a larger town, carpooling with neighbors to make the ten-mile drive. It was in high school that Martha Day discovered her love of writing, primarily through work on the yearbook and through the school library, which she described as a "big window sill full of books." Current books also arrived to her home by mail, sent at birthdays and holidays by a favorite aunt who was a librarian in Washington, D.C. "I got the feeling of emotions coming through words on paper," Martha Day recalled. "I think reading makes people want to write."

At the time of our interview in 1992, Martha Day was still stinging from the gender discrimination that sent her brother away to college while she stayed in the area to care for her invalid mother. "[My brother's] teachers encouraged him," she explained. "They got a rector scholarship. Told him about it. Nobody told me. I made grades just as good as his. But they didn't push girls, and my parents couldn't have sent us on." Instead, when her mother was well enough, Martha Day became "an Alger girl" by moving to the nearest city, working in the book department of a large department store and taking secretarial courses at night.

Martha Day was part of a major migration of the 1920s—an outflow from the countryside that would help to radically alter the community into which she was born (Danbom, 1995). Nevertheless, many social aspects of a lingering, nineteenth-century, agrarian tradition seemed to follow her to town, significantly conditioning her literacy opportunities. Chief among these was the broad overlap of homogeneous social institutions that had organized her childhood and would subsidize her "love of writing" well into adult life.

Early in the interview, Martha Day recalled attending grade school in what she described as "the typical little village of that day." "There was," she said, "a school, a church, and a general store." Education, religion, and commerce were located, literally, at the same intersection of her village so it is not surprising that Martha Day remembered her early literacy learning taking place within a small and local social network. In such a system, you were defined by the family you belonged to, its reputation, and its social standing. Daniel Nelson has written about the economic function of the ethnic homogeneity on which many mid-western rural communities was founded. This closeknittedness, he said, was "an essential feature of the labor system." Residential segregation was perceived "as a prerequisite for material as well as social success." This system depended on "informal bargains and implicit understandings" (pp. 6-7).

Despite the fact that so many people were on the move at this time—or perhaps because of it—this network was still in place for Martha Day when she relocated to the city, 50 miles away. "I never did have to hunt for jobs," she said. "Somebody from my area always said, 'Call me' or 'We've got a job. Would you be interested in it?'" Both the informality and the redundancy of these social networks were evident in Martha Day's account of her break into journalism, which occurred shortly after her marriage to a bookkeeper in 1925. She and her husband began attending a Methodist Sunday School class for young married couples that was taught by the then managing editor of a local newspaper. Aware of Martha Day's interest in writing, he asked her to put together a monthly newsletter for the Sunday School group. A few years later, this man bought a small, regional farm magazine and invited Martha Day to become a part-time "rewrite man," as she called herself. Her job was to recast into short news items the press releases and bulletins that were pouring out of the state agricultural university and experimental stations at that time.

Martha Day worked at home, with a typewriter, desk, and filing cabinet that the editor provided. Each Sunday, she brought her rewrites to church and received a new batch of assignments. Occasionally, the editor asked her to write a feature story, usually about a farm woman. Occasionally, Martha Day's husband would go along on her feature assignments to take photographs that illustrated her published articles. The editor was instrumental in teaching Martha Day classic elements of journalistic style. She recalled:

> He kept building me up, you know, giving me a little more instruction. How the first paragraph had to do this and so forth. He would try to coach me along. He'd say, now that might have been better if you'd included a little less in that paragraph and things like that.

At the same time, the editor encouraged Martha Day to appeal to her farm background as she imagined topics and audiences. "He'd say, 'Imagine you are a farm woman,'" she recalled. "That I grew up on a farm helped me in some respects. It wouldn't today."

When commercial farm publishing entered a bonanza period in the 1940s (Evans & Salcedo, 1974), the newspaper man's local farm journal was bought out by a much larger conglomerate which I will call here the *Mid-Plains Farmer*. Martha Day was invited to move to corporate offices and, between several more buyouts and mergers, gradually assumed more editorial responsibility. She contributed a bi-monthly column on domestic topics, compiled cookbooks that were distributed as complimentary promotions, and traveled regularly to Chicago and other big cities for editorial meetings or conventions of the National Association of Women Farm Editors (whose membership numbered sixteen nationwide). She retired in 1968. At the time of our interview in 1992, she was widowed and residing in a residential care facility near her daughter, some 400 miles from her birthplace. She wrote letters to church friends, some from the original adult Sunday School class, and showed me extensive memoirs she had written in several bound journals that her daughter had bought for her. Although her eyesight was deteriorating, she had recently composed a humorous poem about osteoporosis that a nurse helped her to get published in a health magazine for senior citizens.

This account urges us to consider two dimensions of literacy development: first, how the cultural and social organization of a particular economy creates reservoirs of opportunity and constraint from which individuals take their literacy and, second, how these backgrounds can later become exploitable by agents of change. Martha Day's memories of early literacy learning carry the paradoxes and tensions alive in rural, white societies at the turn of the century, as young people were shaped by conservative values of farm and village even while they were heading for lives elsewhere. For Martha Day, these paradoxes registered most painfully in the gender inequality in which her expanding educational and geographical horizons were encased. While both she and her brother left the farm, he went to college and to an eventual science career in the

nation's capital. She took her interest in reading and writing fifty miles to her state capital for jobs selling books and taking dictation. Yet staying back left her tethered to the conservative social institutions out of which her later literacy opportunities (and their exploitable value) would come. Although village life was already under radical change, the legacies of the village economy, in which religious, educational, and commercial interests blended so routinely, were still intact in her social sphere. This tradition provided the point of contact for Martha Day's entrance into paid, professional writing and sanctioned the informal apprenticeship by which she learned her trade. Local ownership of newspapers and farm journals was part of this social milieu, helping to make Martha Day's local identity part of her qualifications for her first job. Interestingly, in the small, non-specialized operation of the local farm journal (in which news stories and columns were often contributed by farmers themselves) gender specialization was less pronounced, and Martha Day took on the assignments of a "rewrite man," dealing with technical and agricultural information coming from the land-grant college. Only with her later transfer to the larger corporation would her duties become exclusively that of a "woman's" editor.

One more aspect of cultural and social organization is worth noting here. This was a period when print, while becoming more widespread, nevertheless was most readily identified with and experienced through particular institutions in society: the church, the school, the newspaper. These were the basic institutions that had promulgated an initial mass literacy in the latter half of the nineteenth century in America (Soltow & Stevens, 1981). These institutions and their practices came forward into the twentieth century as dense sites of literate resources. This concentration of literate heritages into a few institutions made it common to find people like the Sunday School teacher/newspaper editor, in whose very figure coalesced the religious and secular print traditions that lie deep within the history of this country. Several members of Martha Day's generation recalled influential teachers who seemed literally to embody these print traditions and make them available in informal, apprenticeship relationships. These strong figures were principal forms by which literacy opportunity appeared in the social arrangements of this time and place.[5]

What remains most interesting about Martha Day's background is how attractive and exploitable it became when the farm magazine industry took off in the 1940s. This was a period of favorable growth in agricultural journalism. Farm outputs were up; fertilizers, irrigation, and

other commercial products were being sold, principally through print advertising. A rapid rise in education was under way. Agricultural colleges continued to pump out information, which had to be translated into popular treatments. Magazines in this period attempted to appeal to the entire farm family and to uphold feel-good elements of the agrarian tradition even as they subtly changed habits and practices of farm families toward a new, much more business-oriented mode of farming (Walter, 1996). Women's news was crucial to the commercial success of these magazines, in part because, as Martha Day explained, wives typically were the family members who placed the subscriptions. Although eventually done in by the growing popularity of full-scale, national women's magazines like *Ladies Home Journal* or *Good Housekeeping*, women's sections in regional farm journals carried features on topics ranging from gardening and canning to dress, diet, faith, and marital advice (Evans & Salcedo, 1974). Martha Day wrote on all of these topics in her column, which was often organized around the seasonal rhythms of the farm life in which she had grown up.

The person of Martha Day, the badge of her integrity in her home community, became a badge of her value to the enterprise of farm journalism as it was being practiced at this time. Her conservative farm background, her WASP-ish mores, her ideological comfort with print as an agent of improvement enabled her to voice the values that the *Mid-Plains Farmer* needed for commercial success. These commercial needs became the vehicle for Martha Day's adult literacy development. This window of opportunity was brief, however. By the time Martha Day retired in the late 1960s, general farm magazines were on the wane, women weren't home anymore to be interviewed for her feature stories, more and more of her published recipes were being provided by large food processing industries, and agribusiness was changing the farm economy from top to bottom. In the interim, though, Martha Day fulfilled her desire to be a writer and had gotten to travel to Chicago and other big cities to gather news, attend conventions, and participate in corporate editorial meetings. All of these opportunities were immensely satisfying to Martha Day from the perspective of the 1990s. At the age of 89, she was still writing and finding her constituency through the newer publishing niche of senior citizen magazines.

It was common to find other European American women among Martha Day's cohort whose early opportunities for education and literacy were freighted with similar responsibilities for

upholding agrarian traditions. Rural teaching was one such open opportunity. Industrialization that was under way in the cities at this time relied on steady production of cheap food, and so government and business worked programatically to maintain the farm economy (Danbom, 1995). Rural schools and farm journals were particularly important organs by which the values of agriculture and rural society were reinforced among countryside populations. Ultimately, this effort proved futile, but it was an effort that fell often to women, whether as journalists or grade-school teachers who were recruited to the Country Life Movement at this time.[6] Careers for women engaged them in ideologically conservative work in which their affiliation with rural societies and values became their greatest credential. In other words, conservative gender traditions were exploited for conservative social agendas, with predictable consequences. The work of shoring up a fading way of life that fell to Martha Day and others like her would help to shore up later rounds of economic disadvantage for women as the technological literacy of the male domain came to dominate mid- and late-century life.

In tracing the relationship of Martha Day's literacy development to the economic backdrop in which it occurred, I am not suggesting that hers was the only—or even the most typical—experience of the farm people of her generation. Indeed among other mid-western European Americans of her cohort that I interviewed, extreme physical isolation, poor schooling, instability in farm prices, and the catastrophes of the Depression all made access to material and institutional supports for literacy difficult and sometimes impossible. For people bearing the burden of racial discrimination, the conditions usually were much more difficult. However, I did want to show how dynamics of economic competition create the context in which literate resources are pursued, expended, enjoyed, and rewarded. For Martha Day, membership in a cultural majority within a stable, in fact, growing economy provided both the means and mentality by which her literate interests and skills could pay off. While Martha Day made a successful transition from agricultural to intellectual labor, the transition depended on being well connected to an older order upon whose value she could continue to trade. These social structures provided the forms of sponsorship, invitation, and access by which Martha Day learned and practiced literacy. These structures also provided the ideological constraints that determined what Martha Day wrote, for whom, where, and for how long.

"I Did a Lot with Homelessness": The Case of Barbara Hunt

Barbara Hunt was born three years after Martha Day retired from the staff of the *Mid-Plains Farmer*. She was one of three daughters in a family operating a cash-strapped dairy farm during some of the most crisis-ridden years in the history of the dairy industry. Lower commodity prices, lower incomes, decreasing farmland values, and difficulty in servicing debt were putting lots of family farms out of business (Saupe, 1989). Wisconsin saw a fifty per cent decline in farms between the 1960s and the 1990s, with the biggest decrease between 1987 and 1992, the years that Barbara Hunt was attending high school (Census of Agriculture, 1992). In ironic contrast to Martha Day, Barbara Hunt's keenest memory of the presence of a newspaper in her home were the budget calculations that her father would pencil all over the margins.

Like Martha Day, Barbara Hunt grew up in a small, ethnically homogenous community founded in the nineteenth century by German Catholic clerics and dairy-keepers. At the turn of the century, it had been one of the main production areas in the state for butter, grain, and tobacco. Now, still characterized as a place where few residents are not related to each other, it is anchored by a stone church, built in the 1850s, which abides as the main social institution. But at the end of the twentieth century, there are no schools nor much of a commercial base left in this unincorporated community. Barbara Hunt was bussed ten miles north across the county line for schooling, and her family drove twenty miles south to find a major shopping district. Passed by when a state highway was built in the 1940s, this community experienced less than a three per cent growth rate between 1980 and 1990, compared to a 14 per cent growth rate in the county overall. Per capita income lagged in relation to the rest of the region as well. On the other hand, dairy herds were still thick, and competition among the farms was quite keen. In the late 1980s, land in the area was changing hands at a record pace as farmers with deeper capital were buying out their neighbors.

Barbara Hunt's residence in a village that had grown little in ninety years was not "typical for its day," and its homogeneity was no longer relevant to the structure of labor, as many residents scattered each morning in their cars for service jobs that had overtaken the urbanizing county (see Nelson, 1995). Farm concerns no longer dominated the regional newspapers to which residents of her community subscribed, and the radio, television, and film that infiltrated the Hunt

household in the 1970s and 1980s primarily delivered urban-oriented images, information and perspectives. (Barbara Hunt recalled with a laugh missing her favorite TV sitcoms because of evening milking chores and then having to watch *The Waltons* and *Little House on the Prairie*, which were on at a later hour.) Her school system, answerable to state mandates, typically strained out local culture from its curriculum, so that, for instance, in high school, Barbara Hunt and her sister studied German as a foreign language, not as the language of the founders of their community. The family purchased used books as well as a used typewriter on trips to a Catholic thrift store. ("We used to go to [the thrift store] and the books were real cheap. They'd be like three cents," Barbara Hunt recalled. "So a lot of our books at home were like that. Hey, even if you didn't like them, they were cheap.") Although, as you will see, the teenaged Barbara Hunt, like Martha Day, was discovering a love of writing and searching for avenues for this drive, she was acquiring literacy as part of a demographic minority, as a member of an "unincorporated" political unit within the context of late twentieth-century social transformations. Compared to Martha Day, her literacy sponsors were more remote and more distributed across geographically and ideologically diverse institutions. Assembling available literacy resources was proving more difficult for Barbara Hunt than it had for Martha Day. So was finding employer-sponsors who could enhance her literacy development in her adult years. Her paying jobs were not related to agriculture but rather to low-end retail and government-subsidized services common to areas with stagnant economies. Hired as a home health aide after high school, she charted the weight and pulse of elderly clients on Medicare. ("If anything happened you had to write," she said, "and I had a lady that everything happened to.") But she was laid off when, during major HMO shuffling in the county, the agency relocated. In the mid-1990s, Barbara Hunt's most steady source of income was in day care and private babysitting, as farm wives were seeking off-farm employment to stanch the loss of farm incomes. ("Right now I'm babysitting and I always read to the kids 'cause I think you should. It sinks in," she said.)

To understand how Barbara Hunt undertook literacy development during hard times, it will be useful to look at two major sponsors of her writing during late adolescence and early adulthood: the High School Forensics Association to which she belonged for five years and the human resources program of an area two-year college, where she was enrolled part-time. Both of these institutions were in some ways helping Barbara Hunt to carry her literacy and literate

potential into her local economy.

Barbara Hunt joined the forensics club in eighth grade. "As soon as I heard about it, I knew I wanted to be in it," she said. For one thing, forensics allowed her to satisfy a lifelong quirk: the love of reading aloud. Early in our interview she described a familiar living-room scene from her childhood:

> Ever since I was little, I liked to read aloud, and I'd always bug people. I'd be with [my younger sister] and she'd be on the couch and I'd be on the chair, and we'd be reading out loud. We'd get up to a level and it was, "Stop, stop. Stop reading so loud." We'd get louder and louder. She'd stop and I'd go in my room and read out loud anyway. Maybe it was something where I knew, maybe I knew I would like to do my own thing and write on my own.

As a member of the forensics club, Barbara Hunt first competed in the category of declamation, reciting published dramatic pieces from memory. But by high school, she was performing in the original speech division, composing and delivering four- and eight-minute speeches.

The forensics club in her high school was part of a statewide consortium of speech, debate and theater clubs. Interestingly, this association had been founded in 1895 by a school superintendent from the very same district in which Barbara Hunt was a student. In fact, this was the first high school forensic association in the United States (Brockhaus, 1949). In later years it was sustained by the state university extension service and on occasion sponsored joint competitions with Future Farmers of America. By the time Barbara Hunt was a member, the Forensics Association had become an independent organization subsidized by dues from member schools. Headquarters provided handbooks and other instructional guides, trained and certified speech coaches, sponsored regional and statewide competitions, and published a newsletter. This state organization in turn held membership in a national high school forensics association that also sponsored events and provided instructional and promotional print materials.

As a participant in competitions, Barbara Hunt wrote speeches on topics of her choice. She picked topics that, in her words, "had real emotion," involving issues that "affected me but kind of affected other people." Her preferred topics included abortion, crack use, racism, and homelessness. "I did a lot with homelessness," she explained. "The homeless problem at the

time was my sophomore year, 1986-87. There were three million homeless people in the United States. I wanted to get people to realize what was going on."

To put her speeches together, she used the school library as well as notes she took from TV news and magazine shows. She also was influenced by Hallmark Hall of Fame specials. Song lyrics that she heard on the radio also helped her to reflect on her life and her speech topics. "Songs to me are like some books or some speeches," she said, "when they seem to be exactly what your life is." Barbara Hunt also sometimes enhanced her presentations with film clips that she taped on a VCR. She practiced her speeches while doing the chores. "I'd be going along the front of the cows, feeding them with my shovel, and I'd be doing my speech," she recalled. She traveled throughout the region with her speech team, qualifying a couple of times for championships held in the state capital. She also found satisfaction when she developed original introductions that were praised by her coach and sometimes imitated by other students.

Despite its many transformations over a one hundred-year period, we can say that the forensics association was carrying forward remnants of an oratorical culture that had traditionally sponsored literacy of rural students.[7] The organization trained extracurricular teachers and subsidized public forums in which Barbara Hunt usually had more freedom to express herself than in school-assigned or church-assigned writing.[8] That her writing could be performed orally was a powerful incentive for her continuous membership in the organization—one of the few to which she belonged in high school. This format also provided a strong ethical and emotional appeal for her: "When you give a speech, you have to know the material," she said. "I love it when people [in the competitions] know their speeches and are looking right at you as they give them."[9]

For Barbara Hunt, high school forensics was sustaining oratorical and ethical values long associated with mid-western agrarian politics and local self-improvement organizations. Through it, Barbara Hunt was able to articulate issues that, as she said, "affected me but kind of affected other people." Like Martha Day, she was voicing the conditions of her time and place but translated through urban equivalents that dominated national media as well as the prepackaged research materials in her high school library. This translation of rural social problems through dominate urban ones was not one with which Martha Day had to contend as a writer. And it was not without tensions—some of which infiltrated Barbara Hunt's relationship

with her own parents. For instance, practice in the dairy barn on speeches about drug use and homelessness was conducted under her breath:

> Dad probably got so sick of me. He never knew what I was saying because I would never tell him what I was actually saying. I would say it to the cows so he never knew what I was practicing. I could probably give my homeless speech right now, though, if I really thought about it.

At the time of our interview in 1992, Barbara Hunt's forensics experience was finding some successful resonance in a psychology class that she was taking in a human services program offered at an urban technical college to which she was commuting. In the class, she was being asked to write short essays on contemporary social problems. The course was part of a two-year degree program that had begun in the early 1980s to qualify people as technical assistants in social service programs such as drug rehabilitation and family counseling. This vocational program took shape in response to growing regional demand for professionalization in social work, which was accompanying increased private and public investments in child and family welfare. The program, which focuses mainly on problems of urban poverty, racial discrimination, and substance abuse, had become a popular vocational choice for young, first-generation college women from rural areas. In 1998, six years after our initial interview, Barbara Hunt was still trying to finish her two-year degree while continuing to work in area day care centers.

Although it is too soon to predict the full life and literacy trajectory of Barbara Hunt, it is clear that many of the cultural assets that subsidized Martha Day across her working life either are not available to the younger woman or simply are no longer worth as much in her society. The dairy farm life that Barbara Hunt was born to will be hard to parlay directly into economic opportunities—except in so far as it has fine-tuned her sensitivity to human distress. But a sensitivity to her rural time and place need lots of reinterpretation and transformation to operate in the fields of social service as they are taught and practiced at the end of the twentieth century. To become a writer in this field, Barbara Hunt will need to negotiate abstract academic training, bureaucratized delivery systems, and urban biases that did not confront Martha Day—at least not so centrally—as she broke into agricultural journalism in the 1920s.

For all of the differences in situation between the two women, it is also worth noticing the

similarities in their accounts, particularly the conservative affects of gender. Across the century, gendered divisions of labor constrain options for women, especially those with modest educations. If Martha Day as journalist was tapped to stabilize traditional farm families for the benefit of an industrializing economy, Barbara Hunt as day care worker was tapped to stabilize families in which women and men were being drawn off the farm into service and information economies.[10] At the same time, conservative cultural supports associated with traditional agrarian societies proved vital in encouraging and validating both women's literate skills. Like the figure of the Sunday School teacher/publisher in Martha Day's young adulthood, the State Forensics Association in Barbara Hunt's life delivered traces of older agrarian institutions like the state extension service and self-improvement societies. With its ties to agrarian oratory, speaker integrity, and concern with social issues, the forensics club served as a reservoir of literate practices and values through which Barbara Hunt could use her writing to witness for her place—even as she encountered a form of schooling and a larger society that did not make that easy.

Literacy, Opportunity and Economic Change

Opportunities for literacy are conditioned by economic changes and the implications they bring to regions and communities in which students live.[11] Over the last seventy years, a lopsided competition between corporate agribusiness and family farming altered life for millions of people in the rural Midwest. The accounts of Martha Day and Barbara Hunt can aid speculation about where in the processes of literacy learning economic change has greatest impact. First, we must notice the potential advantages that come with being well connected to dominant economies, whether in periods of stability or change. Dominant economies make their interests visible in social structures and communication systems. Growing up in the heyday of independent agriculture, Martha Day literally could see her way of life reflected everywhere—from the physical arrangement of the institutions sponsoring her literacy learning to the stories and pictures carried in the print media she encountered. Economic typicality as enjoyed by Martha Day seems to remain an advantage even during periods of stressful transition because at least for

a while the powerful resources and skills built up in well developed economies are attractive sites for reappropriation by agents of change. But as family farming receded in economic and cultural dominance, its social structures weakened as an objectified presence in the world around Barbara Hunt.[12] With every revolution by which the greater region in which she lived turned to information and service production, the mismatch intensified between the conditions in which her family labored and the conditions in which she was forced to learn and find a living.

Barbara Hunt's contemporary experience helps to gauge particularly the effects of late century economic life on literacy learning. Even in rural areas, the complexity of social organization as well as the proliferating reliance on print means that encounters with literacy are more likely to be spread out across ideologically diverse sources and specialized, often remote institutions. Influences on literacy are simply more diffused. The role of multimedia in Barbara Hunt's writing development is perhaps the best illustration of this phenomenon, as she coordinated sources from print, television, radio, and film and transformed them all into the older rhetorical genre of the timed speech. For these and other reasons discussed above, making literacy, like making money, was requiring considerable ingenuity, translation, and adaptation on the part of Barbara Hunt. In her early twenties, she was learning reading and writing through the voices provided by a professional and service economy—an economy to which she could aspire but to which she did not belong. This is a condition faced by millions of American literacy learners of all ages at the end of the twentieth century. Barbara Hunt's adaptation seemed to be aided by access to an institutional reservoir of literate experience, the forensics club, that retained at least some of the values and history of her receding way of life.

Finally, I would like to turn to the implications for educators. As we think about students' futures, we need to think as well about their pasts and especially about how the economic histories to which their families are tied position them so unequally in the present. What is called illiteracy or low literacy today perhaps could be more accurately understood as the resources that come forward with histories of economic lock out, bearing all of the discrimination by race, region, gender, nationality, and language that go into that sorry heritage. Some of the students in our classes are being propelled by generations of economic transition that have been fortified over time by expanding educational opportunity and political safeguards. But other students have to figure out how to make a running leap across the hole in their histories left by generations

of economic injustice. That the pace of change has become so much more rapid in the last fifty years makes that hole deeper and that jump more critical. To blunt the inequities embedded in economic change, local schools must conceptualize the ways that their students are connected to the past history and current health of economic and political structures beyond the classroom and to more wholly embrace education as an intervention into that history. Finally, as we think about issues of illiteracy, I hope that we expand consideration to cases like Barbara Hunt whose urge to write was strong but languishing. When we hear that the literacy improvement of our people is necessary for the economic improvement of the country, let's be reminded that the deal cuts both ways.

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ENDNOTES

1. The study of which this report is part involved 80 people ranging in age at the time of the interviews from 98 years old to ten. All the participants were living in south central Wisconsin, virtually all of them in the county surrounding the University of Wisconsin-Madison. This area, whose population numbered more than 367,000 at the time of the 1990 census, is geopolitically diverse. Nearly three-fourths of the county is still farmland (although in the late 1990s it was being lost quickly to commercial and residential development), and the county has often been referred to as the dairy capital of the United States. Small towns provide commercial hubs for rural areas, yet the county also embraces a dense urban area around the state capital. Sprawling suburban communities ring the capital. State government and the university are leading employers, followed by the medical industry, insurance, food processing, and light manufacturing. Retail shops, restaurants, and other services are burgeoning. Settled originally by the Fox, Sauk, and Ho Chunk, the area was populated by the mid-nineteenth century by German and Norwegian immigrants attracted to the rich farmland. It remains today an area with high concentrations of European Americans in both rural and urban areas. Small but growing populations of African, Mexican, and Asian Americans join a few Native Americans (about one per cent of the population) and newly arrived immigrants from Europe, Asia, and Central America to round out the ethnic profile. Seventy per cent of the county's residents were born in Wisconsin. At the time of the study, unemployment in the county was below the national average and educational attainment above it, yet ethnic disparities in income and educational achievement were dramatic. While ten per cent of the population overall was living below the poverty line, the proportion grew to close to one-third among residents of color, most of them working poor.

   Fifty-four of the people I interviewed were European American, sixteen African American, four Mexican American, two American Indian, and the rest of Asian and Middle Eastern descent. Eleven grew up in households where languages other than English were spoken and, in some cases, written and read. Twenty-two of the participants had been born and raised in the county where the study was conducted. Another fifteen had been born and raised in other parts of Wisconsin. The rest grew up out of state, in the East, West, Southwest, West, and other parts of the Midwest. Four were foreign born, although schooled as children in the United States (a requirement I imposed in my selection). Fifty of the participants grew up in rural areas or small towns; twenty were raised in metropolitan areas; the rest in big cities. Ten of the participants had less than twelve years of schooling. Twenty-five had earned high school diplomas or their equivalent. Twenty-three had some years of post-secondary education, with twenty-two attaining a bachelor's degree or more.

   Many of the elderly European Americans I interviewed had been raised on small, family-owned farms in the Midwest and had attended one- or two-room country schools. Now retired from jobs in sales, clerical work, transportation, or dairy production, they were living in area retirement centers or public housing projects or nursing homes, attracted to the county by its good health care and transportation systems. Many of the older African Americans I interviewed belonged to families who had migrated to the Upper Midwest from Southern sharecropping communities during and after World War II, to work for the railroad or the auto industry, and more recently, for the post office, public utilities, and business. Other African Americans, typically younger and poorer, arrived only over the last decade or two as refugees from violence and political neglect in Chicago and

Milwaukee, bringing their school-aged children and finding work in low-paid service positions. Many Mexican Americans in the area arrived originally as farm workers or children of farm workers, up in the summer from Texas border towns, eventually to settle in year-round with jobs in canneries or in small family businesses. Others arrived to attend the university and decided to stay. The diaspora following the Vietnam War brought Southeast Asians to the area over the last decade or so, into diverse occupations. A large bulk of the participants arrived from various parts of the country to study or work at the university or to take positions in the thriving professional and technical economy. All in all participants in this study made their livings as postal workers, farm laborers, factory workers, bus drivers, social workers, secretaries, dairy farmers, journalists, educators, classroom aides, domestics, executives, lawyers, hairdressers, homemakers, technicians, small business owners, nurses and nurses' aides, salespeople, government workers, and more. Thirteen interviewees were students, attending area public or parochial schools, small local colleges or the university. Twelve participants, including Barbara Hunt, the subject of one of the two case studies in this report, lived in households that fell into the government category of low-income.

2. See Brandt (1998) for a fuller treatment of the concept of sponsorship. For a more positive view of sponsors as legitimists and authorizers of literacy, see Goldblatt (1994).

3. See Danbom (1995), especially p. 161 ff. for a description of this "golden age of agriculture"; also see Nelson (1995).

4. For descriptions of the massive build-up of rural schools in the late nineteenth century as well as political and social organization of the schools, see Fuller (1974).

5. Interestingly, these strong teacher-figures continue to appear in the accounts of many African Americans that I interviewed, even those born well into the mid and late twentieth century. Pastors, for instance, provided books and writing instruction and relatives, employers, as well as civil rights activists, provided literacy instruction in informal settings, especially if they were current or former school teachers. As I hope to explore in later writings, this "rich vein" of literate resources, as one interviewee called it, is a byproduct of the tight restrictions placed on African Americans' access to literacy and education. To a greater degree than other groups, literacy heritages continued to dwell intensely within the few institutions—such as churches and kinship systems—that were freer of white control. In many cases, these intensified literate traditions were embodied in single individuals remembered as significant in the lives of many of the African American people I talked with.

6. See Tremmel (1995) for a detailed description of the Country Life movement in education.

7. See Clark and Halloran (1993) for a provocative assessment of how oratorical culture was already being transformed by the end of the nineteenth century by values that stressed individual skill over collective voice. They suggest a direct line between this late oratorical culture and contemporary rhetorics of specialization and professionalization.

8. In several parts of the interview, Barbara Hunt described her distaste for assigned writing, both in school and in catechism class. She was required to keep a journal during a class trip to Germany. "And I did't really like that because the trip didn't turn out exactly what I wanted it to be," she explained. "So there were a few bad things in there and I don't want bad things in my diary so I didn't write everything down." On essay writing in catechism class: "You had to take the First Commandment and say what you believed about it. And I knew I was going to get in trouble if I wrote what I wanted to write. I can either tell the truth, the whole truth, or, I can just kind of . . . I pretty much wrote what he [the priest] wanted to hear."

9. In the same part of the interview Hunt elaborated: "I hate when people don't make eye contact. I hate it when teachers are continuously at the blackboard or something and never look at you to see if you are learning."

10. See Neth (1995) for descriptions of changes in social values that accompnied land transfer and mechanization in agricultural areas. She observes: "As farm families became more deeply enmeshed in the cash economy and as the nature of agricultural work changed, the rules of negotiation within families altered and the survival of the farm unit itself became more problematic. Women and children had to negotiate in a system that increasingly redefined the ways in which they could contribute to the farm economy and threatened the resources of the family and community base" (pp. 11-12).

11. For very helpful conceptual approaches to the implication s of "the information society," see Castells (1989). He writes: "New information technologies are transforming the way we produce, consume, manage, live, and die, not by themselves, certainly, but as powerful mediators of the broader set of factors that determine human behavior and social organization" (p. 15).

12. See Jackson (1975) for a pertinent discussion of the effects of literacy and print in objectifying social life.

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